

Christopher Hitchens and His Critics

A Review

[Lou A. Rollins](#)

Christopher Hitchens and His Critics: Terror, Iraq and the Left, edited by Simon Cottee and Thomas Cushman, New York University Press, 365 pages, 2008.

With an Introduction by the editors, this book collects many prowar propaganda pieces written after 9/11 by former socialist and critic of American imperialism Christopher Hitchens, along with various critiques of Hitchens's warmongering, Hitchens's previously-published responses to some of those critiques, and an Afterword by Hitchens with some further responses to some of his critics. (Among the critics of Hitchens included in this book are Noam Chomsky, Norman Finkelstein, Dennis Perrin, Michael Kazin, Juan Cole, and Richard Seymour.)

Hitchens has been for years a prolific writer on a variety of topics, often dealing with literature, religion, or politics. His books have included *For the Sake of Argument*, *The Missionary Position* (about Mother Teresa), *The Trial of Henry Kissinger*, *Thomas Paine's Rights of Man*, *No One Left to Lie To* (about Bill Clinton), *God is Not Great*, and *Orwell's Victory*.

Hitchens was for many years a columnist for the liberal-to-radical magazine *The Nation*. However, sometime after 9/11, he quit his column, apparently to express his disapproval of those who, unlike him, hadn't become gung-ho for war in Afghanistan and Iraq, and more generally, against "Islamic fascism."



Christopher Hitchens in 2007.
Source: Wikimedia Commons.

The editors have chosen a quotation from Hitchens's *For the Sake of Argument* as an epigraph for this book: "The real test of a radical or revolutionary is not the willingness to confront the orthodoxy and arrogance of the rulers but the readiness to contest the illusions and falsehoods among close friends and allies." In other words, the "real test" is not speaking truth to power, but speaking truth to the less powerful.

As a libertarian who has criticized libertarian illusions and falsehoods and a revisionist who has criticized revisionist illusions and falsehoods, I think I might pass Hitchens's "real test of a radical or revolutionary." However, I don't agree that contesting the illusions and falsehoods of one's friends and allies is the "real test of a radical or revolutionary," as important as that might be. Speaking truth to power is more important than speaking truth to the less powerful.

In any case, Hitchens presumably believes that he has passed the above-stated "real test" by vehemently and venomously attacking "Left-wing" opponents of the "War on Terror" and the invasion of Iraq. Meanwhile, Hitchens's critics, some of them his former friends, might claim that honor for themselves by virtue of their contesting of his alleged illusions and falsehoods.

So who is really contesting illusions and falsehoods, Hitchens or his critics? My impression is that it is Hitchens's critics more so than Hitchens.

Consider the invasion of Iraq. Hitchens supported the invasion, and to judge from his Afterword, still supports it. But Hitchens is an avowed secularist who advocates war against Islamic fundamentalism in support of secularism. So how does Hitchens deal with the fact that the toppling of Saddam Hussein's relatively secularist Baathist regime was, at least in some ways, a setback for secularism in Iraq?

For one thing, in "Bush's Secularist Triumph," from *Slate*, November 9, 2004, he asserts:

George Bush may subjectively be a Christian, but he--and the US armed forces--have objectively done more for secularism than the whole of the American agnostic community combined and doubled. The demolition of the Taliban, the huge damage inflicted on the al Qaeda network, and the confrontation with theocratic saboteurs in Iraq represent huge advances for the non-fundamentalist forces in many countries\.

While Hitchens might have a point, however exaggerated, *vis a vis* the Taliban and al Qaeda, his reference to Iraq is absurd and ridiculous. The "confrontation with theocratic saboteurs in Iraq" has occurred only because of the power vacuum created by the toppling of the relatively secularist Baathist dictatorship. It does not represent a huge advance for secularism in Iraq.

Nowhere in this book will you find any mention by Hitchens of Iraqi women in post-Saddam Iraq threatened with death, and in some cases apparently killed, for not "covering up" ala Muslim mode. Nor is there any mention by Hitchens of the violent attacks on booze makers and booze sellers in post-Saddam Iraq. (Booze, of course, is taboo for devout Muslims.) This omission is particularly telling given Hitchens's notorious taste for alcohol, a matter mentioned many times in this book. (Full disclosure: I wrote this entire review while blind, stinking, staggering, asshole drunk.) If Hitchens is such a great Orwellian truth teller as he likes to pose, why does he lie by omission about such matters?

In any case, Hitchens also tries to rationalize the war in Iraq as a war for secularism by depicting Saddam Hussein as having become a religious nut in his final years. For example, Hitchens tells us (p.116):

"...gigantic mosques began to be built in Saddam's own name." Through a Google search I found reports of the building of a "Mother-of-All-Battles" mosque. However, the writers of those reports regarded Saddam's mosque-building as a cynical use of religion for political purposes, and not as evidence of a sincere religious conversion on Saddam's part. Furthermore, Hitchens may be lying by omission once again. A Google search confirmed that as late as 2003 Saddam was still promoting the rebuilding of Babylon, a project that would be of no interest to a Muslim fanatic. (Babylon was center of civilization back in the days of "ignorance," as ignorant Muslims refer to pre-Islamic times.) Hitchens makes no mention of Saddam's rebuilding of Babylon. Ignorance? Or lying by omission?

Speaking of lying by omission, why is it that, although Hitchens discusses the civil war in Algeria in the 1990s between Islamic fundamentalists and the secularist government, nowhere does he explicitly state that the 1992 elections in Algeria were cancelled by the government to prevent Islamists from coming to power democratically, legally, and peacefully? Could it be that Hitchens wants to avoid acknowledging that sometimes in the Muslim world democracy, which Hitchens purports to support, could lead to the triumph of Islamic fundamentalism and the defeat of secularism? Could it be that Hitchens wants to avoid honestly admitting the existence of such a dilemma for someone such as himself who supposedly advocates war against Islamic fundamentalism in the name of both secularism and democracy?

In any case, I'd like to point out that by advocating war, i.e., the killing of people, inevitably including innocent bystanders, to advance secularism, Hitchens reveals himself to be a secularist fanatic, almost the mirror image of the religious fanatics he wants to destroy.

Hitchens might reply by bleating about "moral equivalence." Well, for the record, I'm not asserting that George W. Bush (or Christopher Hitchens) is "morally equivalent" to Osama bin Laden (or Saddam Hussein). However, I deny there is a night-and-day difference between them. Contrary to the casuistry of warmongers such as Hitchens and Sam Harris (*The End of Faith*), those who intentionally start a war knowing full well that innocent civilians will inevitably be killed (even if they are never specifically targeted), intentionally kill innocent civilians by so doing. Like the "terrorists" who directly target civilians, the warmongers have got innocent blood on their hands. They might not be "morally equivalent" to the "terrorists," but they're not the absolute opposite of them either.

Speaking of Hitchens's desire to destroy people, as I did a little bit ago, it is an irony, or maybe a hypocrisy, that Hitchens is purportedly an opponent of the death penalty. In an interview with *Reason Online*, November 2001, included in this book, Hitchens says that the first political issue he ever took a stand on was the question of capital punishment, which outraged him because it seemed to arrogate too much power to the government. And one of Hitchens's critics in this book, Michael Kazin, says that Hitchens continues to oppose the death penalty.

However, here is a passage from Hitchens's "Saving Islam from bin Laden," from *The Age*, September 5, 2002:

It is impossible to compromise with the proponents of sacrificial killings of civilians, the disseminators of anti-Semitic filth, the violators of women and the cheerful murderers of children.

It is also impossible to compromise with the stone-faced propagandists for Bronze Age morality: morons and philistines who hate Darwin and Einstein and managed, during their brief rule in Afghanistan, to ban and erase music and art while cultivating the skills of germ warfare. If they could do that to Afghans,

what might they not have in mind for us? In confronting such people, the crucial thing is to be willing and able, if not in fact eager, to kill them without pity before they get started.

Kill them without pity before they get started. Sure as hell sounds like a death penalty to me; indeed it sounds like a preemptive death penalty.

If, as seems to be the case, Hitchens advocates capital punishment for "the disseminators of anti-Semitic filth," then there is another irony, or hypocrisy, here, given that Hitchens, according to the editors of this book, is a believer in freedom of expression as a universal value that always must be defended everywhere without compromise.

Back to Hitchens's lying by omission. Consider his romanticizing of the Kurds. The picture he paints of them is utterly without warts. They were brave fighters against Saddam's tyranny and defenders of democracy and "civil society." That's all. In this regard, it is useful to take Hitchens up on his recommendation of Kenneth M. Pollack's book, *The Threatening Storm: The Case for Invading Iraq*. There you can find information about the infighting between the two major Kurdish political groups, a subject never mentioned by Hitchens. Furthermore, according to Pollack, the group he calls Ansar-i-Islam and Hitchens calls Ansar-al-Islam was a Kurdish group. There's no mention of that by Hitchens in his denunciation of this group of "bin Laden clones." And Hitchens never mentions Kurdish terrorism in Turkey.

More on lying by omission. In "Why Ask Why?" from *Slate*, October 3, 2005, Hitchens asks why "so many genial Australians" had to die in a terrorist bombing in Bali. (As we all know, all Australians are genial. G'day, mate. Put another Pommie bastard on the barbie.) He answers: "Well, is it not the case that Australia sent troops to help safeguard the independence of East Timor and the elections that followed it? A neighboring country that assists the self-determination of an Indonesian Christian minority must expect to have the lives of its holidaymakers taken." Well, maybe so. But conspicuous by its absence from Hitchens's explanation is any mention of Australia's participation in "Operation Iraqi Freedom." But Hitchens doesn't want to admit that the invasion and occupation of Iraq could possibly be a reason for any subsequent terrorist attacks.

No, to admit that would be to admit that opponents of the Iraq invasion might have been right in predicting that it would provoke more terrorism. And Hitchens simply will not admit that.

Thus, after bombings in London, Hitchens, in "We Cannot Surrender," from *Mirror*, July 8, 2005, laid down the law regarding what was thinkable and what was not:

I know perfectly well there are people thinking, and even saying, that Tony Blair brought this upon us by his alliance with George Bush. A word of advice to them: try and keep it down, will you? Or wait at least until the funerals are over. And beware of the non-sequitur: You can be as opposed to the Iraq operation as much as you like, but you can't get from this "grievance" to the detonating of explosives at rush hour on London buses and tubes. Don't even try to connect the two. By George Galloway's logic, British squaddies in Iraq are the root cause of dead bodies at home. How can anyone bear to be so wicked and stupid? How can anyone bear to act as a megaphone for psychotic killers?

For Hitchens, there is only one permissible explanation for such actions: the innate and incorrigible aggressiveness of fundamentalist Muslims who are at war with all culture and all civilization. Hitchens seems to be somewhat simpleminded. He seems to think that if some violent actions by Muslims are

motivated by religious fanaticism, then all violent actions by Muslims must be so motivated and there cannot possibly be any other reasons for any violent actions by Muslims.

Hitchens repeatedly depicts jihadists as religious fanatics who, because they are religious fanatics, cannot be appeased or negotiated with. The only thing to do is kill them. However, in "Inside the Islamic Mafia," from Slate, September 25, 2003, he includes a quotation, taken from Bernard-Henri Levy's *Who Killed Daniel Pearl?*, of a Saudi lawyer who specializes in financial transactions:

"Islam is a business," he explains to me with a big smile. "I don't say that because it's my job, or because I see proof of it in my office ten times a day, but because it's a fact. People hide behind Islamism. They use it like a screen saying 'Allah Akbar! Allah Akbar!' But we know that here. We see the deals and the movements behind the curtain. In one way or another it all passes through our hands. We do the paperwork. We write the contracts. And I can tell you that most of them couldn't care less about Allah. They enter Islamism because it's nothing other than a source of power and wealth, especially in Pakistan... \.

Is this Saudi lawyer right? Maybe so. I don't know. But my point is that Hitchens seems to accept this testimony, even though it contradicts the view of Islamists he expresses throughout the rest of his writings in this book, thereby casting doubt on the veracity of his usual war propaganda. Is Hitchens too much of a retard to realize this? Or just too brazenly deceitful to care?

Hitchens, as a supporter of the Iraq war, wanted to discredit former ambassador Joseph Wilson, the Joe Wilson who, in effect, shouted "You lie!" at George W. Bush from the Op-Ed page of *The New York Times*. Wilson had investigated some documents purporting to show that Saddam had tried to acquire uranium yellowcake from Niger, and he concluded, as did international inspectors, that they were forgeries.

Hitchens, in a piece published in *The Weekly Standard* but not included in this book and which I found by a Google search, admits to the existence of only one forged document. Meanwhile, in this book, he claims that an Iraqi ambassador visited Niger in 1999, and the only plausible explanation for this visit was to acquire uranium yellowcake. Well, maybe so. I don't know. The first time I've heard about this was in Hitchens's Afterword to this book.

In any case, Hitchens is brazenly lying when (p. 334) he says Wilson "...wasted an enormous amount of time on his now-disproven assertion that members of the Bush administration approached Robert Novak (a strong opponent of the war and admirer of Wilson's) in order to 'expose' his wife Valerie Plame." Novak reputedly opposed the Iraq war. Whether or not he admired Wilson, I don't know. In any case, Novak, by his own account, first received the information that Wilson's wife worked for the CIA from a "senior administration official," specifically Richard Armitage, then Undersecretary of State. (It was then confirmed for Novak by "Bush's Brain," Karl Rove. Meanwhile, other Bush administration members, such as Lewis "Scooter" Libby, Chief of Staff for Vice-President Dick Cheney, had been leaking the information about Plame's CIA position to other journalists. For example, Judith Miller late of *The New York Times*, testified about such a conversation with Libby, and produced her notes on it, at Libby's trial for perjury and obstruction of justice. So Hitchens was lying like a Republican rug when he claimed that Wilson's claim is now disproven.

There are indications in this book that Hitchens is a fan of--gasp! horrors!--Winston Churchill, the belligerent drunk, like Hitchens. (Regarding Churchill, see, for example, *Human Smoke* by Nicholson Baker.) I wonder if Hitchens agrees with the statement attributed to Churchill: "In wartime truth is so precious that it must be attended by a bodyguard of lies." (See Anthony Cave-Brown's *Bodyguard of Lies*.)

While Hitchens seems to be a fan of warmonger Churchill, he's apparently not a fan of Charles Lindbergh. Jeff Rigenbach's book, *Why American History is Not What They Say: An Introduction to Revisionism*, which I reviewed in the previous issue of *Inconvenient History*, includes a quotation from revisionist historian James J. Martin commenting favorably on Gore Vidal's recent political writings such as *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace* (a title which was used by revisionist Harry Elmer Barnes in the early 1950s as the title of an anthology of revisionist writings on World War II). Here's what Hitchens says about Vidal (p. 207): "Gore Vidal's admirers of whom I used to be one and to some extent remain one, hardly notice that his essential critique of America is based on Lindbergh and "America First"--the most conservative position available. And for Hitchens, despite his renunciation of socialism, his fond reminiscences of Margaret Thatcher, his buddying up with "neoconservatives" such as Paul Wolfowitz, etc., "conservative" is still a purely pejorative epithet. But "radical" is a good word. And of what does radicalism consist? The overthrowing of governments. Not the US government, but governments of countries in dire need of more secularism, such as Afghanistan under the Taliban or Iraq under Saddam Hussein (ha ha ha).

(Incidentally, America Firsters included liberals such as John T. Flynn and Oswald Garrison Villard, Progressives such as William Borah and Burton K. Wheeler, and Socialists such as Norman Thomas.)

Among Hitchens's fetishes is "antifascism." He absurdly labels al Qaeda et al. "Islamic Fascists," but what's fascism got to do with it? Hitchens uses the terms "fascist" and "fascism" frequently, but he never bothers to define them. Apparently, almost anyone that Hitchens strongly disapproves of and wants to drop bombs on is a "fascist." It's interesting to see an alleged disciple of George Orwell, author of the essay, "Politics and the English Language," abusing the English language so outrageously in his deceitful war propaganda. Hitchens even has the chutzpah to label Islamic fanatics as "nihilists."

Hitchens repeatedly stretches the truth via exaggeration. Thus, he refers to translators of Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* who were "eviscerated." A Google search confirmed that translators of *The Satanic Verses* were stabbed, in one case to death. But as far as I can tell, Hitchens is the only one who uses the emotive and exaggerated word "eviscerated." Hitchens also refers to museums destroyed by the Bad Guys. A Google search produced reports that the Taliban might have destroyed thousands of non-Islamic statues in museums in Afghanistan, but not that they destroyed museums. On page 125, referring to the civil war in Algeria in the 1990s, Hitchens announces that "...if Algeria had fallen to the fundamentalists the bloodbath would have been infinitely worse...." Infinitely worse? Every living thing in the universe would have been killed? Hitchens also absurdly claims that "they" are opposed to all culture. And, recycling a bit of standard war propaganda, he claims that "they" are enemies of all civilization.

On page 340, Hitchens writes: "Professor Juan Cole writes that he believes the late Abu-Musab al-Zarqawi to be a fictitious character. And people think it is I who owe the explanation." Perhaps Hitchens should explain how he managed to confuse Richard Seymour with Juan Cole. It was Seymour, not Cole, who expressed doubt about al-Zarqawi's actual existence. And perhaps Hitchens should explain how he

managed to twist Seymour's expression of doubt into a flat-out assertion that al-Zarqawi is fictional. Here's a direct quotation from Seymour's "The Genocidal Imagination of Christopher Hitchens": "There is considerable doubt about whether Zarqawi is alive, has two functioning legs, and is really in Iraq. Whether Zarqawi is a myth or a monster, the only story that obtains here is that there is no story. Saddam and Zarqawi never did have their Baghdad nuptials, however convenient the tale may be for pro-war storytelling."

There's plenty of evidence in this book that Hitchens needs to get himself a new crystal ball. Thus, for example, in "Ha Ha Ha to the Pacifists," published in *Guardian*, November 29, 2001, Hitchens predicted, "The Taliban will soon be history." Hitchens, like other warmongers, is consistently pessimistic about peace and optimistic about war. But more than eight years later the Taliban are still not history.

In "The Literal Left," from *Slate*, December 4, 2003, Hitchens told us, *vis a vis* the Iraq invasion, "There has been no refugee exodus, for example, of the kind [the "peaceniks"] promised." Would Bitchin' Hitchens care, or dare, to repeat that statement now? (Nowhere in this book do I see any subsequent admission by Hitchens that there was indeed a refugee exodus.)

According to Dennis Perrin, in "Obituary for a Former Contrarian," from *Minneapolis City Pages*, July 9, 2003:

In several pieces, including an incredibly condescending blast at Nelson Mandela, Hitch went on and on about WMD, chided readers with "Just you wait!" and other taunts, fully confident that once the US took control of Iraq, tons of bio/chem weapons and labs would be all over the cable news nets—with him dancing a victory jig in the foreground. Now he says WMD were never a real concern and that he'd always said so. It's amazing that he'd dare to state this while his earlier pieces can be read at his website. But then, when you side with massive state power and the cynical fucks who serve it you can pretty much say anything and the People Who Matter won't care\.

The "earlier pieces" referred to Perrin are not included in this book. The only prewar claim by Hitchens related to Iraqi WMD in the pieces by Hitchens included in this book is a claim that it was absolutely certain that Saddam had acquired some of the "weapons of genocide" and wanted to acquire more.

It's true, as Perrin says, that after the invasion Hitchens claimed he'd never believed Saddam had much WMD at the time of the invasion. Thus, in "Weapons and Terror," from *Slate*, May 28, 2003, Hitchens wrote:

...I did write before the war, and do state again (in my upcoming book, The Long Short War) that obviously there couldn't have been very many weapons in Saddam's hands, nor can the coalition have believed there to be. You can't station tens of thousands of men and women in uniform on the immediate borders of Iraq for several months if you think that a mad dictator might be able to annihilate them with a pre-emptive strike\.

But wasn't there a massive buildup of American and other troops around Iraq's borders in 1990 when Saddam was known to have, and still did have, chemical and biological weapons? Thus, this argument by Hitchens is questionable, yet the implication is interesting. Here Hitchens is clearly implying that Bush and Blair lied about Iraqi WMD. And yet the man who wrote a book about Bill Clinton's lies never explicitly says Bush lied. Perhaps he just didn't want to give opponents the satisfaction of reading that. ("Bush lied. People died.")

Despite his poor track record as a prophet, Hitchens tenaciously clings to a rationalization for supporting the Iraq invasion on the basis that a "confrontation" with Saddam was "inevitable." Of course, thanks to the invasion that Hitchens advocated, there's no way this dogma can ever be put to an empirical test.

Speaking of dogma, it should be noted that Hitchens makes many claims in this book for which he provides no evidence. And, unlike many of his critics in this book, his writings contain few references to sources that a skeptic can double-check.

Hitchens brags about his ability to recognize a lethal threat when he sees one. But Hitchens sees only one lethal threat--Islamic fanaticism. It's true, for instance, that a Muslim fanatic killed Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh. (But, contrary to Hitchens, van Gogh was not a descendant of the great artist, i.e., Vincent van Gogh. He was a descendant of Vincent's brother, Theo, the great art dealer.) It's also true that it was probably Jewish fanatics who killed Francois Duprat and Alex Odeh. And it was a Christian fanatic who tried to kill Larry Flynt. But Hitchens doesn't seem to know or care about such examples of non-Islamic fanaticism in action. Furthermore, Hitchens seems not to recognize the lethal threats of neoconservatism and "Armageddon Theology." (Regarding the latter, see, for example, Pastor John Hagee's book, *Jerusalem Countdown*.) But perhaps Hitchens is too simpleminded to comprehend a world with a variety of threats, or perhaps his war propaganda is aimed at such simpleminded people, people inclined toward what Lawrence Dennis called "monodiabolism," the belief that there is one, and only one, "devil" at any particular time. (One last comment about this: In my opinion, Hitchens is a lethal threat, but presumably he doesn't see a lethal threat when he looks in the mirror.)

My time and space for this review are running out, so I'll have to finish up without discussing many aspects of Hitchens' war propaganda. But Hitchens' critics in this book make many points that I haven't made in this review.

Among the things Hitchens claims to love is skepticism. However, my satirical definition of "skeptic" seems to fit Hitchens: "One who doubts what he does not want to believe and believes what he does not want to doubt." (This definition can be found in the "Lucifer's Lexicon" section of my book, *The Myth of Natural Rights and Other Essays*.) Readers of *Christopher Hitchens and His Critics* should have lots of salt on hand when reading it, especially when reading Hitchens' incoherent and deceitful war propaganda.

As I mentioned before, one of the books by Hitchens was titled *Orwell's Victory*. If I could put a title on this review, it would be *Hitchens' Waterloo*.

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